

II Sysops

A bi-monthly newsletter for, and by, Apple II sysops
Issue 4 January/February 1992

Board-by-Board News

What's happening on bulletin boards around the world

Jixalti BBS - (410) 549-2584

Jixalti, the home BBS of II Sysops, now provides anonymous logon for II Sysops readers. The anonymous logon gives you instant access to a file transfer area where you can download the latest version of AppleNet, as well as public domain and shareware mods for other commercial systems. This area will be updated regularly. To logon to Jixalti anonymously, use username "ANONYMOUS" with "IISYSOPS" as your password.

IBECC BBS - (303) 426-1866

The International BBSing and Electronic Communications Conference has announced IBECC '92, to be held August 13-16, 1992 at the Sheraton Denver West. To attend, you must be a member of the IBECC, which runs \$80 annually. That includes admission to the conference.

Topics will include "Why Should I Care?" (How does BBSing affect me?), "Safe Computing," "Rumor Control 1992," "Why Kelly CAN Read," and "Staying Alive" (BBSing and the physically challenged). IBECC is a non-profit organization.

Pro-Sol - (619) 670-5379

The Morgan Davis Group has announced a special offer for ProLine 1.8. For a limited time, you can buy ProLine directly for just \$99. This is due to expire February 14, so you need to hurry!

The Captain's Quarters (614) 295-0556

METAL version 1.04.00 has just been released and FutureNet has grown to 21 active sites. To Wilson, author of METAL, pointed out that all registered owners of METAL get free upgrades, which includes an upgrade to

METAL GS, which was recently officially announced.

Infinity's Edge - (510) 820-9401

ANSI-Term, the GS terminal program which emulates color ANSI through the SHR screen, has been officially released. This makes the "ANSI-BBS" emulation in ProTERM 3.0 look like kids stuff. Retail price is \$69.95. Qualified sysops receive a 15% discount. ANSI-Term is published by Parkhurst Micro Products (PMP).

The OggNet network has been growing lately. Not only are there now more member BBS's, but there are more networked topics than before. Oggnet now carries several topics for GBBS support, including SuperTAC and EXfer. There is also a networked topic providing official support for ANSI-Term.

In This Issue...

Board-To-Board News - What's happening on selected bulletin boards around the world

Future Vision - Greg Berigan's review of the companion BBS to METAL

Improving Your BBS - Ten ways to make your BBS a better BBS

Vendor List - A listing of companies that sell products to Apple II sysops and users

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Future Vision

A Product Review

By GREG BERIGAN
Sysop of Ursa Minor Beta BBS
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A Vision of the Future

First I'd like to say that, at the time of this writing, Future Vision (FV) is in version 4.0d9. This review though is based on version 4.0d8 of FV, and so some things in this article may have changed.

Also, the system setup that it is being reviewed on is only an Apple IIgs with an 800K drive, 140K drive, and 800K RAMdisk, and with those limitations in mind, on to the review proper.

Future Vision v4.0d8

Perhaps the best way to review a program is to start with the very basics that the sysop will encounter, starting with the program installation. I can't say that installation was painless, but it did go rather smoothly for me. I didn't have to open up the documentation files, and indeed have yet to actually read any of them carefully, although I may have been able to avoid some of my problems if I had read all the docs.

One problem I encountered was the system's assumptions regarding my storage configuration. It took a few attempts to get it to set things up right, but eventually it got to a point where I could move things around the way I wanted them.

New users may be a bit annoyed in how the system handles new accounts. Indeed, when I first applied for an account on an FV system, I was surprised that it did not ask me to enter a descriptive message to the sysop (which I found out later was a configurable option), and that it instituted an apply now, access later policy. Looking back on it now, it isn't that bad of an idea, and is one of the things I kept intact on my configuration.

I've found that users who are lazy still can't get

used to the way FV expects one to login, no matter how straightforward the instructions are presented. It is amazing how many people think a name like "The Metermaid" is their real name! However, real-name logins instead of handle logins is a nice extra security measure, and great for the sysop who doesn't keep good paper records of who's who... or what.

And for those users who can't remember their real name (amnesia?), the system does have an option to send a message to the sysop in a special "gripes" file for their pleas for help. However, the text it displays before allowing the user to enter their message could be a bit less harsh. Perhaps the author has problems with people being able to forge information and claiming to be someone else, but it isn't very friendly to a new modem owner to tell them their pleas for help will "most likely be ignored."

On validating accounts, I find myself agreeing with a fellow sysop regarding what should be done with the application: a user application shouldn't be deleted until it is done so explicitly by the sysop. While the Auto Validate option in the application reader saves time, a function that deletes should never be set up as the default. A configuration option to force a hardcopy of the application when Auto Validate is used would be prudent if auto deletion is retained. It is just too easy to trash that information as is.

Once the users get into the system, they are then introduced to what I feel is one of the biggest misfeatures in the BBS world: Hot Keys -- the system's assumption that you have a noiseless connection so that you can enter commands without hitting return. This is annoying not only for the user with line noise, but also for the sysop who might like to make a comment to the user without going into a chat mode. They're fine when reading messages, but for elsewhere, there needs to be a user-definable option to turn off Hot

Keys. This was one of the first things I did to my system.

Online help is very extensive, but I've found many systems choose not to implement them. This is partly due to how much storage they use, but even more so that some versions of METAL would not handle the help file's filename properly. I'm very happy to say that with METAL v1.04.00 this has been fixed.

The voting system is nicely done. This is the first vote system I've encountered where common users are allowed to enter their own vote questions. However, it failed to take the next step in allowing responders to add responses. As of v4.0d8, there was a serious bug which would cause it to crash due to trying to increment non-existing subanswers. It is so simple an error that I expect it has been fixed now.

The message bases are fairly basic. I can't find much wrong with them from the user's-eye-view in their main functions of reading and posting. However, what with the networking capabilities and number of message areas carried on netted systems, the configurable quickscan (which allows users to specify what message bases they don't want to read) needs a lot of work. Chiba City is a prime example. With so many message areas, it is very annoying to have to reconfigure the entire quickscan because a few new areas came into being. A base-by-base quickscan config option would be much more preferable.

From the sysop's side, the Single Message File (SMF) format, which puts all the messages in one file (and thus saves disk space normally wasted by ProDOS allocation blocks for multiple small files), is a nice addition to the system. It fills in the spot that ACOS users would find vacant in METAL. Unfortunately the system doesn't "crunch" the files when necessary, and sysops running it on small systems will notice message areas with as few as 25 active messages filling up their storage devices. There is a manual crunch routine in the Maintenance area, but it isn't fast enough to be used as an automatic crunch, and with L&L Productions looking for

things that are just a bit too similar to ACOS in METAL, one doesn't seem to be in the future.

The Maintenance area however has very little features left out of it. Indeed, it is so extensive, it is compiled from 4 files, and commands separated into three menu levels. These correspond to the three levels of sysop access, so for a sysop with cosysops, this is useful to make sure that they don't have access to higher functions that aren't part of their cosysop duties, such as the ability to delete files, but to allow them to validate user accounts or create new message areas.

But That's Not All

Myself, I can do fine with just the above features, but FV offers more than this, and is what puts it over GBBS "Pro".

Coming standard with the system is a game system which allows one to quickly add or remove gaming modules. This makes adding new games a snap, although it doesn't consider the different staff access levels, so a persistent cosysop could gain access to higher Maintenance levels. Also your average file system with batch transfer abilities. Neither seem to have any real innovations in them.

One new system is the User Shell. Myself, I'm not comfortable with giving each user their own personal directory on the system, but it is a useful item. You can use it to send files to individual users privately, and to grant access to special commands to handle special accounts that treat mail to them as input to programs, such as private mailing list maintaining code, or a files-by-mail system. Such systems are useful when you are tied into a network.

And tied into a network is FV. It comes with code to interface with FutureNET, a network of FV systems which is now expanding to connect with OGGnet (a GBBS "Pro" network), FidoNET (a primarily IBM network), ProLine (more on that in a later issue), and USENET. Indeed, there is already a system to gateway Internet mail to FutureNET systems being tested. This allows upgrades to be sent to individual sysops and

correspondence with other users on FutureNET nodes in the US and now Canada. However a bit more work is needed to prevent repeated articles due to improperly configured nodes and converging message paths.

This does enlarge the size of the program relative to GBBS "Pro", but this enlargement is reduced by taking advantage of some of the properties of METAL. FV has code segments which are common with many areas of the system, and to reduce the source-size of the program, these segments are stored in separate files and, using METAL's .include compiler directive, added to the code at compile time. This leaves more space for additional code or messages.

And additional code is available. There are replacement transfer systems, and several games available, many of which are METAL versions of their original ACOS counterparts. There are also routines for the sysop to make running the system easier, such as an in-system programming shell, terminal programs, and online manual systems to look up METAL documentation.

Too Much of a Good Thing?

All these features are fine, but it does make FV harder to modify. Where GBBS "Pro" is a skeleton system ready to take whatever changes you want to do to it, FV has all the muscles and skin placed for you, but it makes it harder to get down into the system to make it your own. I had to excise code just to have message areas. I don't have storage for files, so the file transfer system and user shell had to go.

Networking, like multiple incoming line systems, never was a requirement for a BBS, and I feel never should be. To me, a system that is networked has lots of callers, and few local posters, and maintains its popularity by what messages it brings in from the network. A network holds your system into a fixed configuration, with few chances for customization. And there is always the chance that the part of the system you got working just the way you like it is "upgraded", and you can't re-implement your

design without losing net-compliance. I like getting my hand into the code and personalizing a system, and to me that means more than flashy menus, and definitely means working without a net.

Many people, when they move from GBBS "Pro" to METAL, ask about converting the code they have been using with ACOS to METAL code, wondering if there was a routine to do it automatically. The usual response they are given is that they instead look at FV and modify it to their liking. It isn't that easy. FV is deeply woven with itself, and it is hard to pick and choose what routines in the .included files are wanted. Where GBBS "Pro" is a skeleton system, FV is fleshed out -- and it is hard to get under all that flesh and make fundamental changes to the skeleton underneath. Perhaps a stripped-down system would be marketable to those that like making a system their own.

And The Winner Is...

Overall, I find the METAL/Future Vision combination an excellent one. METAL's boons overcome FV's shortcomings, and you can't sell a BBS language without a BBS to go with it. By its very nature, FV can be changed to fix its problems, and many of the features that it provides in stock form might have been rather expensive if they needed to be purchased separately. For those with the power and desire to run a feature-laden system, and still for a low price, this package would be the best. For programming, I believe METAL (by the time of the previous article's writing) has overcome practically all of its shortcomings, and with programming shells and the like becoming available, it is getting easier to write and customize new code. Overall, METAL/FV is the superior system to GBBS "Pro"/ACOS, and gives you more for your money. However, check your system configuration with the description of mine at the beginning of this article. If it is in any way smaller than the storage I listed above, I'd suggest you get the GBBS "Pro"/ACOS package instead, or get more hardware. METAL/FV won't work on anything much smaller than that. [IIS]

What Makes A Good BBS?

A Good Sysop, Of Course

By DOUG GRANZOW for II SYSOPS

"What can I do to make my BBS more successful?" That's a question that I'm sure all of us have entertained at least a few times. There are probably as many different ways as there are snowflakes, but I've come up with a list of ten general ways to get users to call your system again and again. Why anyone would actually want to put so much money into a computer system and then let anyone use it, though, is a topic left for someone else to explore.

1. Create an image for your BBS. Come up with a theme and name your BBS accordingly. "The Leech Line" was once a popular system in the Baltimore area. As the name implies, the system specialized in file transfers and lots of them. You were dumped directly into SuperTAC when you logged on and few users ventured past that point. Your BBS might be centered around politics, online games, role-playing, discussion, adult files, or something entirely different. Do what **you** want, and stick to it.
2. Convey that image from the very beginning. The new user sign-up is probably the most neglected part of any BBS. And that's unfortunate, because that's where looks really count. What a new caller sees when he calls the first time usually determines whether or not he'll call again. Give him a reason to call back.
3. Voice validate **all** new users. Voice validation is a lot more than a security procedure. It gives you a chance to establish a relationship between you and your users. Introduce yourself (Use your real name!) and welcome the user to your system. If your new-user application lets callers type a message to the sysop, find something in that message to talk about (For example, "I see you have a GS. How long have you owned it?" or "Hey, you play lacrosse? So do I!") To finish the call, remind the user that he's been validated and offer him his user ID and password, in case he lost it. (Or in case he didn't save it because he didn't intend on calling back -- but don't say it that way.) By the end of each call, you'll have a good idea as to whether or not this user will ever call back and become a valuable member of your system. If you can afford it, voice validate even long distance callers. After all, they called you long distance too.
4. Respond promptly to all mail. Even if your response is "I don't know," it's better than leaving the user waiting for a response that's never going to come. Mail like "I'm having a problem with my computer / printer / keyboard / etc." could be answered with "I can't help you on that one, but if you post your message on the appropriate message base, I'm sure one of the other users will be able to help." Mail like "I hate the software you're using! It's full of bugs!" could be answered with "I've worked hard to get rid of any bugs, but users seem to be better at finding them. What specifically isn't working right?"
5. Answer the chat page occasionally. We all hate getting into chats with the kid who wants nothing more than to play CB Simulator. But those are easy enough to get out of -- just fake some outside event, whether it's dinner being served, someone at the door, or a need to go to the store. Most users will have a question of some sort. Take the time to answer their question and make sure they don't have any more before you walk away from the keyboard. You might want to program your BBS so that the chat command is a toggle; first it turns the page on, then it turns the page off. This will break the annoying habit of some users who hit "C" several times in a row (and, invariably, logoff before you even have a chance to respond).
6. If the board is down, answer the phone or leave it off the hook. Usually when you answer

voice you'll get nothing more than a click, but there's a good chance that there's someone on the other end listening through their modem's speaker. Immediately state how long till the board will be back up. As an example: "Hello, the BBS isn't up now, go voice if you can, otherwise call back in 30 minutes." The word 'now' is important: It makes it clear that the condition is only temporary.

7. Don't get too involved in political discussions. Unfortunately, users tend to be afraid to disagree with the sysop on anything. I'm not sure why, but even I am guilty of going mute on a BBS once the sysop voices his opinion. There's nothing wrong at all with the sysop participating in the message bases -- he **should** participate -- but don't overpower users when the conversation gets opinionated (unless you don't want that type of discussion on your BBS). If you just can't resist a good debate (and a lot of us can't!) then consider setting up a fake account that you can post under where no one will know that you're the sysop. Be careful, though! Don't get your sysop account and your debating account mixed up!
8. Watch your users (especially new ones) while they are online. Someone who doesn't know their way around the system as much is likely to uncover some parts of your BBS that you have

probably forgotten about. When was the last time you updated the system information file? Did you ever fix that bug at the menu prompt? Little things that don't work or contain dated information are not likely to be reported by users, but do need to be corrected. And watching people explore your system is probably the only way you can find out about these things. Keep pen and paper handy to jot down reminder notes to yourself.

9. Update your system news regularly. If you make a change to the system that might interest users, or that they need to know about, put it in the system news. A regularly updated news file reflects a sysop who is actively involved in his BBS, and is constantly trying to make it better.
10. Never, ever, delete or edit a message unless you really have to. It is far better to post a reply informing everyone that you do not approve of the contents of the message. If leaving the message online would be a legal risk, then clearly you should delete it. But in general, going around and deleting messages you don't like makes you look like a tyrant.

Maybe you disagree with some of these. If you do, why? Write us a letter: // Sysops, P.O. Box 720, Eldersburg, MD 21784. It might be published. [IS]

READER MAIL

Dear // Sysops,

I got the first issue. It looks very promising. Are planning to make them longer in length?? What about comparisons with/on WARP6 BBS? (I'm just curious as to how it stacks up, features, problems, pluses, etc. I know the price is right!!)

Also I loved the 'Old Timer Test,' [Issue 1] even though I only scored a six it was fun. Maybe you could do an article on each of those questions, like the Sider Graveyard? And what's the deal with Greg Schaeffer's brother and the

GBBS back door? They all sound like very interesting stories I'd like to hear. Thanks.

Neal Layton
The WAC BBS
(503) 390-9321

We do have plans to cover Warp Six in future issues. We also plan to cover AppleNet, ProLine, Litfal, Vantage, EBBS and Eclipse, as well as anything else we hear about for the Apple II. There's a lot more out there than we realize!

Unfortunately, we can't afford to make // Sysops any bigger than it is right now. Once we

get more subscribers and finish paying our startup costs, we may be able to go to a larger format. As far as the Old Timers' Test goes, perhaps there are some readers out there who would like to submit an article telling about one of the events mentioned. And I'd like to stress to new readers, to avoid a panic, that a back door to GBBS no longer exists.

Dear // Sysops,

Thanks much for my first issue of // Sysops [Issue 2]. Is there a back issue still available, possibly an article index of those articles mentioned within each issue?

**Thanks,
Robert Benson**

as subscriptions (i.e. one back issue for \$2.50, 3 for \$6, 6 for \$10, etc.), if they are available. Currently we do have a few copies left of each issue. Our first issue contained part one of the High Speed Modems series, an Old Timer's Test, and an introductory letter from the editor (me!). Issue two had part two of the Modems series, an interview with Andy Nicholas, and a review of GBBS "Pro". Issue three had part three of the Modems series, and a review of METAL. Every issue has Board-To-Board news.

// Sysops would like to hear from you! Published letters earn the writer one free issue of the newsletter. Send you letters to: // Sysops, P.O. Box 720, Elbersburg, MD 21784. Please mark them as 'For Publication'. If you would like to write a full-length article (worth a full-year subscription!), please contact us about writing guidelines, formatting, etc.

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